**[Road to Damnation](javascript:void(0))** / Evelyn Fredericksen

“This continual harassment grows tiresome. I was in the midst of important studies, delicate magic that requires weeks of preparation and ritual.” Kel’Thuzad had been forced to wait for hours, fuming at the insult, before he was permitted the bare courtesy of confronting his accusers. The group’s apparent spokespersons, Drenden and Modera, had long been two of his most vocal critics. Nonetheless, they would not have launched this latest inquisition without support from Antonidas, who had yet to show himself. What was the old man up to?

Drenden snorted. “That’s the first time I’ve heard your sort of magic called ‘delicate.’”

“An ignorant opinion from an ignorant man,” said Kel’Thuzad with cold precision.

A distant voice spoke to him then, the voice of a friend. By now its remarks had grown so familiar that they felt like his own thoughts. They fear and envy you. After all, thanks to this new course of study, you are continuing to gain in knowledge and power.

There was a sudden flash of light, and a scowling gray-haired archmage appeared in the hall. A small wooden chest was tucked under his arm. “I would not have believed it if I had not seen it myself. You have abused our patience for the last time, Kel’Thuzad.”

“The venerable Antonidas graces us with his presence at last. I began to think you had fallen ill.”

“Age frightens you, doesn’t it?” Antonidas snapped. “You realize there’s only one alternative.”

Let him think so, if that comforts him.

Calming somewhat, Antonidas said, “As for my health, you need not have concerned yourself. I was merely busy elsewhere.”

“Searching my chambers for evidence of forbidden magic? You should know better.”

“True, your chambers bore no such evidence. The warehouses you own in the northlands, on the other hand…" Antonidas gave him a disgusted look.

Damn the man for being a self-righteous snoop. “You had no right--”

Antonidas tapped his staff to the floor, silencing him, and turned to the other magi. “He has turned the buildings into laboratories for a series of foul experiments. See for yourself, colleagues. Behold the fruit of his labors.” He opened the chest and tilted it so that all could see.

The decaying remains of several rats. Two were still scrabbling clumsily at the sides of the chest in a vain attempt to escape. Several magi bolted to their feet, and there was a hubbub of dismay. Even the golden-haired high elf who had been sitting in the back of the room seemed startled, though Prince Kael’thas was a man whose age made that feat nearly impossible.

Turning back to the captive rats, Kel’Thuzad saw that they had collapsed and stopped moving. Another set of failures, apparently. No matter. Someday he would create a stable undead specimen. His hard work would be vindicated. It was only a matter of time.

There are loose threads in the spell that silences you. Shall I show you how to unravel it?

Time, and his unknown ally, whose enigmatic voice occasionally helped him to move one step closer to his goal. Show me, he thought.

A young woman arrived in another flash of light. As she went to stand by Antonidas, the high elf’s gaze followed her with troubled, brooding intensity. But Jaina Proudmoore took no notice; she was utterly focused on her duties. The handsome prince didn’t stand a chance.

Her vivid blue eyes spared Kel’Thuzad a curious glance. She took the box from Antonidas, who explained, “My apprentice will see to it that the chest and its contents are incinerated.”

The woman inclined her head and teleported from the room. Across the room, the high elf frowned at the spot she had vacated. Under other circumstances, Kel’Thuzad might have found the silent drama amusing. However, left unchallenged, Antonidas was continuing his tirade. Mutely seething, Kel’Thuzad resumed his efforts to free himself.

“We have permitted this state of affairs long enough. Rapped his knuckles occasionally for his more questionable pursuits. Tried to guide him. Now we find he has been practicing evil magic. The name of the Kirin Tor is fast becoming a curse on the lips of the local villagers.”

“You lie!” Kel’Thuzad burst out, and a few of the magi were his again, waiting for him to offer an explanation. “Peasants remember the Second War just as well as we do. Say what you like about the orcs; their warlocks wielded great power. Power against which we had precious little defense. We have an obligation: we must learn to wield and counter these magics ourselves.”

“To form an army of dead rats, their unnatural existence measured in hours?” Antonidas asked dryly. “Yes, my boy, I found your journals, too. You kept quite detailed records regarding this abominable enterprise. You cannot mean to use these pathetic creatures against orcs. Assuming, of course, that the orcs should ever emerge from their current lethargy, escape the internment camps, and somehow manage to become a threat again.”

“Being younger than you hardly qualifies me for boyhood,” retorted Kel’Thuzad. “As for the rats, they are the gauge by which I measure my progress. It is a standard experimental technique.”

A sigh. “I am aware that you spend most of your time in the north these days. Your increasingly lengthy absences were what caught my attention in the first place. Yet even you must have heard that the king’s new tax has given rise to civil unrest. Your selfish pursuit of power could incite the peasantry to revolt. Lordaeron would be engulfed in civil war.”

He hadn’t known about the tax. Antonidas must be exaggerating. Besides, true magi would focus on matters of greater substance. “I will be more discreet,” he offered, gritting his teeth.

“No amount of discretion could possibly hide a secret of this magnitude,” said Drenden.

Modera added, “You know that we have always walked a fine line in order to protect our people without becoming a danger ourselves. We dare not sacrifice our humanity--not in appearance, and certainly not in truth. At best, your methods would see us condemned as heretics.”

It was too much. “We’ve been called heretics for centuries. The church has never been fond of our methods. Such sentiments notwithstanding, we are still here.”

She nodded. “Because we avoid dark magic, which leads to corruption and catastrophe.”

“Because we are necessary!”

“Enough.” Antonidas sounded weary. To Modera and Drenden, he added, “If words alone could have reached him, they would have done so before now.”

“I have heard your words,” Kel’Thuzad said in exasperation. “Merciful gods, I have heard them until I am sick of them! It is you who will not hear mine, and put aside your antiquated fea--”

“You mistake our purpose here today,” interrupted Antonidas. “This is not a debate. At this moment, your properties are being thoroughly searched. All items tainted by dark magic will be confiscated and, once identified to our satisfaction, destroyed.”

His nameless ally had warned him this might happen, but Kel’Thuzad had not blieved. Strange. He felt almost relieved that events had come to this pass. The need for secrecy had limited the scope of his work, hindered his advancement.

“In light of the evidence,” Antonidas said heavily, “King Terenas has agreed with our judgment. If you do not abandon this madness, you will be stripped of your rank and holdings, and you will be exiled from Dalaran--indeed, from all of Lordaeron.”

His mind racing, Kel’Thuzad bowed and left the hall. Doubtless the Kirin Tor were keeping his so-called disgrace quiet, fearing repercussions should his actions become public knowledge. For once, their cowardice would work in his favor. His wealth would never line the king’s coffers.

pack of wolves stalked Kel’Thuzad for miles, just out of spell range, before they fell behind. Glancing warily over his shoulder, he saw them snarl and flatten their ears before darting away. Thankfully the arctic winds were dying out as well. In the distance he could make out the summit, a bleak mountaintop, the sight of which gave him a sense of triumph and foreboding. The very peak of Icecrown. Few explorers had ventured onto the glacier, and even fewer had survived to tell the tale. But he, Kel’Thuzad, would scale its heights alone and look down on the rest of the world.

Unfortunately almost no maps existed of the frigid continent of Northrend, and he found them woefully inadequate, like the supplies he’d proudly packed for this journey. Uncertain of the path ahead and his ultimate destination, he could not teleport. Not sparing himself, he staggered onward. He had lost track of how long he’d been walking. Despite his fur-lined cloak, he was shivering uncontrollably. His legs felt like pillars of stone: awkward and numb. His body was beginning to shut down. If he didn’t find shelter soon, he was going to die out here.

Eventually a glint of light drew his gaze: a stone obelisk carved with magical symbols, with a citadel beyond it. At last! He hurried past the obelisk and crossed a bridge of what looked like pure energy. The citadel’s doors opened at his approach, but he stopped short.

The entryway was guarded by two grotesque creatures that resembled giant spiders from the waist down. Six narrow legs supported each creature’s weight; the other two limbs were attached like arms to a vaguely humanoid torso. More fascinating than the creatures themselves, though, was their current state. Their bodies showed an assortment of open wounds, the worst of which had been roughly bandaged. One guard’s arms were bent at improbable angles. Ichor oozed from the other’s fanged maw, but the guard made no effort to wipe it away.

Despite the familiar stink of undeath, the guards showed no sign of confusion, unlike Kel’Thuzad’s rats. The spider-like creatures must also have retained most of their original strength and coordination. Otherwise, they would have made poor guards. Their creator was clearly a skilled necromancer.

To his surprise, they moved aside to let him pass. Unwilling to question his good fortune, he gladly entered the citadel, which was significantly warmer. In the hallway ahead was a battered statue of one of the half-spider creatures. The building itself was of recent construction, but the statue was quite old. Come to think of it, he’d seen similar statues in the ancient ruins he’d passed through on his way north. The cold was slowing his wits.

At a guess, the necromancer had conquered a kingdom of these spider-like beings, successfully converted them into undeath, and taken their treasures as the spoils of war. Exultation filled him. He would surely learn great things here.

At the end of the hall, a gigantic creature lumbered into view: a grotesque mixture of beetle and spider. It approached him at a deliberate pace, and Kel’Thuzad observed that its towering body sported an even greater number of wounds and bandages. Like the guards, it was undead, but its sheer bulk made him feel more frightened than impressed. He doubted he had sufficient skill to vanquish such a monster, much less raise it from the dead.

The creature greeted him in a deep bass voice that reverberated within its ponderous body. Although it spoke perfectly understandable Common, the sound chilled him. Strange buzzing and clicking underlaid its words. “The master has been expecting you, archmage. I am Anub’arak.”

It had both the intelligence and motor skills for speech--astonishing! “Yes. I wish to become his apprentice.”

The huge creature simply looked down at him. Possibly it was debating whether he would make a tasty snack.

He cleared his throat nervously. “May I see him?”

“In due time,” Anub’arak rumbled. “Thus far, you have devoted your life to the pursuit of knowledge. An admirable goal. Still, your experiences as a mage cannot have prepared you for serving the master.”

What could have inspired such a speech? Did the majordomo consider Kel’Thuzad a rival? That was a misconception to dispel as soon as possible. “As a former member of the Kirin Tor, I have more magic at my command than you could probably imagine. I am more than prepared for whatever tasks the master gives me." "We shall see.”

Anub’arak led him through a number of tunnels that took them far beneath the earth. At last Kel’Thuzad and his guide emerged into a vast ziggurat whose name, so Anub’arak said, was Naxxramas. From its architecture, the building was another product of the half-spider creatures. Indeed, the first chambers Anub’arak showed him were populated by the undead things, which swiftly lost their novelty. Actual spiders also skittered here and there among the undead, busily spinning cobwebs and laying eggs.

Kel’Thuzad hid his distaste. He wouldn’t give the enormous majordomo the satisfaction. Indicating one of the undead spider-things, he said, “You bear them some resemblance. Are you all derived from the same race?”

“The nerubian race, yes. Then the master came. As his influence spread, we made war upon him, foolishly believing we stood a chance. Many of us were slain and raised into undeath. In life I was a king. Today I am a crypt lord.”

“In return for immortality, you agreed to serve him,” Kel’Thuzad mused aloud. Remarkable.

“‘Agreed’ implies choice.”

Which meant that the necromancer could compel obedience from the undead. Kel’Thuzad might be the first living being to come here of his own free will. Faintly disquieted, he changed the subject. “This place is full of your people. I take it you rule here?”

“After my death, I led my brethren in conquering this ziggurat for our new master. I also oversaw the process of altering it to serve his design. However, Naxxramas does not fall under my authority. Nor are my people its only occupants. This is but one wing out of four.”

“In that case, lead on, crypt lord. Show me the rest.”

The second wing was everything Kel’Thuzad could have hoped. Magical artifacts, laboratory equipment, and other supplies that put his old laboratories to shame. Huge rooms that could hold a veritable army of assistants. Undead beasts that had been cleverly sewn together from a hodgepodge of animals and reanimated. Even a few undead humanoids composed of body parts from assorted humans. The human body parts bore no wounds: unlike the nerubians, the humans had not fought their fate. The necromancer must have acquired the bodies from a local graveyard. Wise to avoid drawing notice. The Kirin Tor would have taken immediate action.

Unfortunately the third wing proved less interesting. Anub’arak showed him an armory and an area for combat training. Next the crypt lord led him through chambers filled with hundreds--no, thousands--of sealed barrels and shipping crates. Why would Naxxramas need so much in the way of supplies? Well, the pyramid was well stocked in the unlikely event that it was besieged.

At last he and Anub’arak reached the last wing. Giant mushrooms grew in a garden area and gave off noxious fumes that made Kel’Thuzad feel ill. The soil beneath each mushroom seemed unhealthy, possibly diseased. Going closer to inspect it, he stepped on something that squished: a fist-sized creature that resembled a maggot.

He shuddered and hastily moved on. The next room had a number of small cauldrons filled with a bubbling greenish liquid. Curious despite the substance’s revolting odor, Kel’Thuzad took a step forward, but a massive claw abruptly blocked his way.

“The master wishes you to remain among the living. Your time has not yet come.”

His breath caught in his throat. “It would have killed me?”

“There are many who will not serve the master in life. The fluid resolves that difficulty.” At Kel’Thuzad’s blank look, the crypt lord said, “Come. I will show you.”

Anub’arak took him to a cell that held two prisoners. Villagers, by their homespun clothing. The man was cradling the woman in his arms; she was ghastly pale and soaked in sweat. Alive, both of them, though the woman was clearly ill. Kel’Thuzad glanced at the crypt lord uneasily.

Her desperate glassy eyes found Kel’Thuzad and brightened. “Mercy, my lord! My body fails. I have seen what will happen next. One bolt of flame, I beg of you. Let me rest in peace.”

She was afraid of becoming the necromancer’s thrall. According to Anub’arak, she would have no choice. Kel’Thuzad looked away queasily. After all, she couldn’t live much longer anyway.

She struggled out of the man’s arms and clung to the cell bars. “For pity’s sake! If you will not aid me, at least take my husband to safety!” And she wept hopelessly.

“Hush, sweetheart,” the man murmured behind her. “I will not leave you.”

“Make her be quiet!” Kel’Thuzad whispered fiercely at Anub’arak.

“The noise distresses you?” With one lightning-quick motion, Anub’arak shot one claw through the bars and speared the woman through the heart. Then the crypt lord casually shook the corpse off onto the floor.

Her husband howled with anguish. Guiltily relieved, Kel’Thuzad began to turn away, but froze when the corpse started thrashing and arching against the stone floor. The male villager gaped in shock and fell silent.

The dead woman’s skin was changing color: shifting to a faintly greenish gray. Gradually the spasms died off, and she scrambled unsteadily to her feet. She rolled her head to one side, then shivered as she spotted her husband. “Guards, get this man out of here.” she rasped.

The guards didn’t move. With a groan, she raked her fingers through her tangled brown hair, and Kel’Thuzad got a good look at her face. Blood vessels were darkening under the skin, and her eyes seemed feral, crazed.

Her husband asked doubtfully, “My love? Are you all right?”

A bitter laugh escaped her and twisted into a snarl when he took a hesitant step toward her. “Don’t come any closer.”

The man ignored her protest and went toward her, but she shoved him away with enough force to send him flying. He hit the cell bars and slid down, stunned.

“Stay back.” Her speech was becoming more guttural. “Hurt you.” She wrapped her arms around herself, backed up until she bumped against the opposite side of the cell. “Hurt you, hurt you,” she whined, and something began to be wrong with the way she said it.

Uncomprehending, Kel’Thuzad watched her slowly, jerkily lift a hand to the hole in her chest. She hissed, grimaced, and brought her fingers to her mouth. Licked them. Sucked at them. Then in a blur of movement, she was leaping at her husband, lashing out, baring her teeth--

The man screamed, and blood spurted onto the cell floor. Kel’Thuzad flinched away. Closing his eyes didn’t help; he could still hear unspeakable sounds. Ripping, shredding. Chewing. A soft, wretched mewling that he very much feared meant the undead woman was aware of her actions on some level, but unable to stop herself.

Sickened and horrified, he teleported out of Naxxramas altogether, staggered a little distance away, and threw up. Finding a patch of unsullied snow, he scooped up handfuls and scrubbed viciously at his mouth and face. It felt as if he would never be clean again. What had he gotten himself involved in?

One by one, his scattered thoughts fell into place. The necromancer was no simple academic, interested in studying a widely condemned field of magic. Nor did he plan to stop at fortifying his home against attack. He was mass-producing a fluid that converted people into zombies. Naxxramas also had an enormous stockpile of supplies, weapons, armor, training grounds….

These weren’t defensive measures. They were preparations for war.

A sudden wind buffeted him with an unearthly shriek, and a group of cold wraiths coalesced in front of his eyes. He had read of them years ago in the Violet Citadel. The vague description of their cloudy, translucent forms had mentioned nothing of the frigid malice in their glowing eyes.

One of the wraiths drifted closer and asked, “Second thoughts? As you see, your little trick will not avail you. You cannot escape the master. At any rate, what could you hope to accomplish? Where would you go? More to the point, who would believe you?”

Fight or flight: those would have been the heroic choices. Heroic, but pointless. His death would serve nothing. By agreeing to become the necromancer’s apprentice, Kel’Thuzad bought himself time in which to bolster his own skills. With enough training, he could surpass the necromancer or catch the man off guard.

He nodded to the wraith. “Very well. Take me to him.”

The wraiths teleported him back to the citadel and escorted him downward through a series of halls and rooms that Kel’Thuzad knew he wouldn’t be able to remember later. At last, deep beneath the earth, he and the wraiths entered a huge cavern whose dank chill sank into his bones. In the center of the cavern was a dizzyingly tall spire of rock. Blanketed in snow, a set of stairs spiraled up the sides of the spire.

He and the wraiths began the ascent. His heart pounded with excitement and dread. When he realized that his steps were slowing, he sped up again. His resolution didn’t last long, however. It felt as if a weight was pulling at him. Evidently the long journey across Northrend had tired him more than he’d thought.

Far above him, at the top of the spire, he could barely make out a large chunk of crystal. Untouched by snow, it had a faint bluish gleam. There was no sign of the necromancer.

One of the wraiths used a frigid gust of wind to give him a push. His pace had been lagging again. Irritably he tugged his cloak closer and forced himself to keep climbing, though he was breathing hard.

Time passed, and a blast of sleet brought him back to full awareness. He had stopped in the middle of the stairs to lean on his staff. The air was foul and suffocating; he was panting by now. “Give me a moment,” he managed.

A wraith behind him said, “We cannot rest. Why should you?”

Grimly Kel’Thuzad resumed the climb and hunched his shoulders against the growing exhaustion. He raised his head with an effort and saw that the glimmering crystal was drawing close. At this distance, it looked like a jagged throne with hazy dark shapes inside it. There was a palpable aura of menace about the thing.

The wraiths brushed against him and startled him into crying out. Echoes of the sound reverberated throughout the cavern. He clutched at his fur cloak with clammy, trembling hands. His breath rattled in the back of his throat, and he had the sudden terrible urge to turn around and start running. “Where is the master?” he asked, and his voice was high and quavering.

No answer, just a storm of hail that lashed at him cruelly. He stumbled and recovered his footing. With each step, the throne looming above him felt more oppressive, pushing his head down, bending his spine. He could barely walk upright. Before long, he fell to his hands and knees.

The necromancer spoke directly to Kel’Thuzad then in a voice that was no longer even remotely kind. Let this be your first lesson. I have no love for you or your people. On the contrary, I intend to scour humanity from this planet, and make no mistake: I have the power to do it.

Relentless, the wraiths did not permit him to stop. Beyond humiliation, he abandoned his staff and began to crawl. The necromancer’s malevolence beat down upon him and pressed him deeper into the snow. Kel’Thuzad was shaking and whimpering, and o gods, he’d been wrong--stupidly, colossally wrong. This wasn’t fatigue. It was stark terror.

You will never catch me unaware, for I do not sleep, and as you should have already guessed, I can read your thoughts as easily as you might read a book. Nor can you hope to defeat me. Your puny mind is incapable of handling the energies I manipulate on a whim.

Kel’Thuzad had long since torn his robes, and his leggings were useless against the icy rock of the rough-hewn stairs. His hands and knees left bloody tracks behind him as he struggled up the last spiral. The throne radiated bone-chilling cold, and mist surrounded it. A throne not of crystal, but of ice.

Immortality can be a great boon. It can also be agony the likes of which you have not yet begun to fathom. Defy me, and I will teach you what I have learned of pain. You will beg for death.

He came within a few feet of the throne and could go no farther, pinned helplessly beneath the thing’s overwhelming aura of inhuman might and hatred. An unseen force bore down on him and ground the side of his face into the unyielding stone. “Please,” he found himself sobbing. “Please!” Further words escaped him.

Finally the pressure eased. The wraiths flitted away, but he knew better than to rise. Doubted, in any case, that he could. His eyes, however, unwillingly sought out his tormentor.

A set of plate armor was seated within the throne, rather than upon it. Kel’Thuzad might have thought the armor merely black, but, blinking hard, he saw that no light at all was reflected from its surface. In fact, the longer he looked, the more it seemed to devour all light, hope, and sanity.

The ornate spiked helm obviously doubled as a crown. It was set with a single blue gem and, like the rest of the armor, appeared empty. In one gauntlet, the figure clasped a massive sword whose blade had been etched with runes. Here was power. Here was despair.

As my lieutenant, you will gain knowledge and magic to surpass your most ambitious dreams. But in return, living or dead, you will serve me for the rest of your days. If you betray me, I shall make you into one of my mindless ones, and you will serve me still.

Serving this spectral being--this Lich King, as Kel’Thuzad was beginning to think of him--would assuredly bring Kel’Thuzad great power… and damn him for all eternity. But that knowledge came far too late. Besides, damnation had little meaning without the prospect of true death.

“I am yours. I swear it,” he said hoarsely.

In response, the Lich King sent him a vision of Naxxramas. Small black-robed figures stood in a broad circle outside on the glacier. Their arms, visibly wreathed in dark magic, rose and fell in time with a droning chant that eluded Kel’Thuzad’s understanding. Tremors shook the earth beneath their feet, but they kept casting.

You will go forth and bear witness to my power. You will be my ambassador to the living, and assemble a group of like-minded people to further my plans. Through illusion, persuasion, sickness, and force of arms, you will establish my hold upon Azeroth.

To Kel’Thuzad’s astonishment, the ice shifted and cracked, and the top of a ziggurat pierced the frozen ground. A building was being pulled up out of the soil. While the robed figures redoubled their efforts, the vast pyramid continued its impossible emergence. Chunks of dirt and ice flew outward with explosive force. Soon the entire structure had broken free of the earth’s embrace. Slowly but surely, Naxxramas rose into the air.

And this will be your vessel.